

Severe Language Disorder

Information for Parents and Teachers

What is Severe Language Disorder?

Severe Language Disorder (SLD) can also be referred to as Severe Language *Impairment* or Severe Language *Disability*.

It is defined as *difficulty in acquiring skills involved in understanding, processing, or expressing language to the extent that one is unable to participate fully, without special assistance, in the social and educational life of the school.*

A diagnosis of SLD is made in the *absence* of hearing loss, brain injury, intellectual disability, cultural or social factors, and English as a second language (ESL). While language difficulties are commonly experienced by children who present with the above mentioned factors, a true SLD cannot be attributed to any other cause.

Defining Language

Language is an integral part of communication. We use language to exchange thoughts, feelings, information and ideas with others. Unlike 'speech' which refers to production of speech sounds, the term 'language' refers to our use and understanding of words and sentences.

There are two major components of language:

- **Receptive Language** Listening comprehension (understanding what other people say)
- **Expressive Language** Language production (getting your message across)

Receptive and Expressive language skills can be further divided into 3 sub-components:

1. The 'form' of language

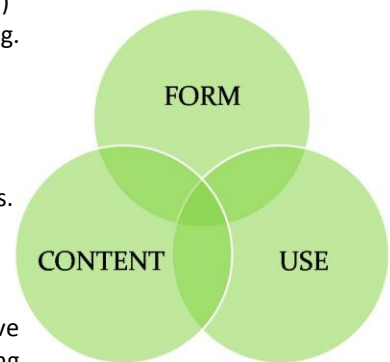
- **Syntax** understanding the rules for putting words together in sentences
- **Morphology** understanding and using grammar rules (e.g. verb tense – run/ran)
- **Phonology** understanding the rules of how speech sounds go together (e.g. the sounds c-a-t make a word but the sounds p-z-g do not)

2. The 'content' of language

- **Semantics** knowledge of vocabulary and knowledge about objects and events.

3. The 'use' of language

- **Pragmatics** understanding and applying 'form' and 'content' rules to achieve successful communication in a variety of contexts. (e.g. knowing there is a difference in the way you talk to teachers or peers, non-verbal communication such as body language)



Identification

Several risk factors may contribute to SLD, these include genetic factors, socio-economic status, difficulties in pregnancy and frequent ear infections.

Children with language difficulties present in many different ways. However, they can exhibit the following characteristics:

- Difficulty following instructions
- Difficulty learning concepts
- Limited vocabulary
- Grammatical mistakes
- Poor attention skills
- Difficulty relaying stories
- Behaviour problems (presenting as class clown, quiet, angry, frustrated, defiant)

The presence of SLD may have considerable implications for the individual and in the family. Studies have shown that language disorders may have significant effects upon school achievement and /or be associated with social, emotional or behavioural problems. Long term difficulties may also persist in adolescence and beyond. Although exact percentages for the incidence of SLD in Australian children are difficult to obtain, Speech Pathology Australia reports approximately 577,000 school-aged children may have difficulties with language.

How is Severe Language Disorder diagnosed?

If concerns have been raised regarding a child's language ability, a referral to a Speech Pathologist for a language assessment is usually the first step taken. The Speech Pathologist will take an extensive case history of the child to help gather information and determine the context of the problem. The next step involves evaluating the child's language performance using assessments appropriate to their age and needs.

Although there are a number of methods for determining language skills, standardised language tests are a formal way of assessing language function and tend to be time-efficient, which is one reason they are so widely used. They involve standard procedures, that is, all clinicians who administer a particular test will use the same pictures, give the directions the same way, and use the same scoring methods. Such tests are typically norm-referenced and give us a general idea as to how the child's communication skills compare with same aged peers. Once a child has been assessed, the Speech Pathologist will develop a program specific to the child's needs.

Information and Support

Victorian school systems including State, Private and Independent schools provide support services and most schools have access to a speech pathology program. Private speech pathology services are also available for families and schools to access support.

The Program for Student's with Disabilities provides funding support for children attending state schools in Victoria. For a child to be deemed eligible for assistance through this program, a detailed formal assessment process is undertaken. Assessment scores and supporting information need to meet stringent criteria to ascertain that SLD is the primary factor. The 'Language Support Program' has also been implemented in state schools to further support students with oral language difficulties.

Your local school or health provider can offer assistance as to what services are available and best suited to your child's needs.

Speech Pathology Australia also provides information about therapy services throughout Victoria.

www.speechpathologyaustralia.org

Information accessed from:

Paul, R (1995). *Language Disorders from Infancy through to Adolescence: Assessment and Intervention*. Mosby-Year Book, Inc. Missouri.
 Law, J, Garret, Z & Nye, C (2008). *Speech and Language Therapy Interventions for Children with Primary Speech and Language Delay or Disorder (Review)*. The Cochrane Collaboration.

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